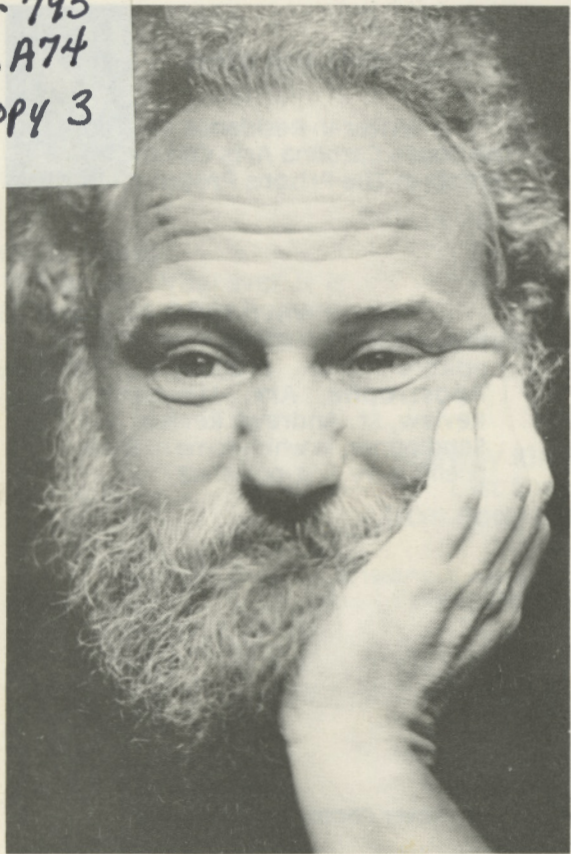


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Ashes in the Grate

Selected poems by Dale Alan Bailes

Dale Alan Bailes

**Writer-In-Residence for
the South Carolina Arts Commission's
Artists-In-The-Prisons Program, 1983**

My appreciation is extended to the editors and publishers of **Apostrophe, Arx, Mississippi Review, St. Andrews Review, and Sandlapper**, in which some of these poems were first published.

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Silence. Ashes
in the grate. Whatever it is
that keeps us from heaven,
sloth, wrath, greed, fear, could we only
reinvent it on earth
as song.

—Galway Kinnel
"Last Songs"
from **Body Rags**

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The Jester

The jester on your wall grins
at you. His hand has been, will be
poised to pluck the lute.

You pull yourself from sleep
or death, recall some sound
that scared you to this fading point

where sleep and death are one
and come or don't come
as your left eye struggles open

and your right eye simply won't.
He has waited while you slept
while you crept through

the other room of the dream
and out. He has grinned as
a black cat crossed the street

to avoid crossing your path,
as ladders crashed around you
that you wanted to walk under.

He will watch you tumble from
the bed, return from all that pain
awake, stumble to another room

to wet your trembling hands.
His hands will tense, prepare
to play the chord to match

the sound your pleading eyes
will make, as you watch the mirror
drop you and you shatter.

To Barbara, at her Potter's Wheel

I am jealous of your craft.
Intent, you kick the wheel
to spin the shaft
that turns the head
and mold the clay to shape
your new creation.

Those quick hands
molded subtler clay
a while ago.

Long hair you loosed then
for me falls in the way
of clay and wheel and vision.

Eager to share all our worlds
I gather back your hair again
stuff it down your smock
and wait.

You notice only
the absence of annoyance
and do not feel
the yearning touch.

Much relieved, you kick
the wheel again
and so I am set spinning.

Full Moon

Last night I crucified
a vampire, silver-bulleted
a werewolf, and shook the hand of Frankenstein
while in my back yard
a clotheslined sheet
quietly went on ghosting.

The Trick

Thinking of you in terms
of two-over-light was easier.
That way you shared
my morning rite and left me
to idle pleasure
of my day. Now, having
seen you trundle from
a lonely man-filled bar
your shoulders slouched
against the weight of darkness
I know you more than I care
to; know your crumpled
single bed and barren room;
know why your ten-hour-day
is comfort to you.
Now instead of leaving me
to my own tight rare existence
you take me trembling with you
into your lonely night.

The Drunken Prospector

There was gold all around last night
I saw it. The leaves held gleams
too swell to be mere fool's gold
and heavily resisted evening wind.

On water was a shimmering path
a mule could almost walk on
with pack and tools and me to boot.

I allowed that Midas must have
fled this way when his wealth
exceeded pleasure. I stepped
off measures there to mark

my meager claim, then danced
and fell down laughing to my sleep.

An ill-made move; for as I slept

marauders crept in silently and
stole my treasure...Oh, Stranger!

Judge me not insane; the gold is
there for having if you take the proper

road. Come with me then, provide
us with a stake, and gather courage
together we may find the Mother Lode.

Ki Haiku

I cannot be a star
shining through the night?
All right then—a firefly!

After the thunderstorm, silence
leaves scull playfully
the tranquil stream

Caution, eager heart;
one flower petal-proud
so little proof of spring

Chattering birds celebrate
my soul, sweet flower
blossoms everywhere

Sharks While Swimming

Lore would have him master
of that realm, where helmsmen
mates, and feckless hands tell

of his feral foraging. An arm,
a leg; once half a man was seen
to disappear to jaws he never

felt. A shark while swimming
knows nothing of this legend. Blood
smelt and tasted is his only

knowledge. Dumb to dawns and
sunsets, he serves his chattledom
with fierce devotion. Some

sound, some thrashing motion, will
call the million years of now
into his body. Strike! Circle...

Strike! And still the moment's
meal will bring no rest. A shark
while swimming must seek protective
waters, dark and plankton fested.
There, fugitive from his own death
he takes what liesure he will ever know.

Threading, threading endlessly
through sleepless depths, crude toil
drives this shore-starved Sisyphus.

The Gentleman Caller

No need to keep him waiting
fifteen anxious minutes; no stately
staircase has to frame her entrance.
Cordelia sits quite calmly at the table
saucered cup untouched and slowly colding.

Her mind commands a sunny day, with horses
she smells the Spring and smiles
at mustached men. A storm can rage there
now, or suns go setting; white-haired
gallants still tip crisp hats and court her.

What matter if those days she lives
are twenty-five or fifty years divided?
This day alone will mean most to her heart
stout friend through all and keeper
of the great loves she has known.

Now he has come, the quietest caller
she has yet received. "Madame?" "Oh yes.
I am quite ready. You are right on time."
Cordelia, rising, bids a host of friends adieu
whispers gaily, "It was always you."

The Messenger, Finally Arriving

I have been trying
to reach him for years:

to tell him to turn
right instead of left

to choose the blonde
instead of the brunette.

Always the barriers
were too strong.

With patience, time and luck
I am closer now than ever.

Again
it is too late.

He is sitting here writing
this poem.

I do not interrupt.

Epistle to Persephone

We became accustomed to drought
as the farmer does
without realizing. Walking
through fields of dust
he forgets the yields
of yesterday; even despair dies.

Unnoticed dust coats his eyes
nostrils, throat.

Drought merely is
except at times when
(as ashes might be searched for
some fragment spared by flame)

he stoops
to grasp this choking stuff
to clasp it tight, to sift it
one last time.

This done
he trudges on indifferent
to what once meant
his greatest joy or pain
until his brow is shattered
by a single drop of
rain



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dale Alan Bailes has published poems and short stories in some two dozen periodicals during his fifteen years as a writer. His poems have been collected in the booklength **Cherry Stones** (1971) and the chapbook **Sharks While Swimming** (1974). He has edited seven collections of student poetry from the South Carolina Arts Commission's Poets-In-Schools Program. In 1983 he served as Writer-In-Residence for the SCAC Artists-In-Prisons programs and edited the anthology from that program, **I Could Strangle the Wind**.

Mr. Bailes holds degrees in English and Media Arts from the University of South Carolina, and completed the Master of Fine Arts degree in Professional Writing at the University of Southern California in 1982.

He has taught English and Scriptwriting at the University of South Carolina and Freshman Composition at the University of Southern California. Currently pursuing his interests in screenwriting, he serves as an adjunct faculty member of the Limestone College Management Science Program and as an English instructor for the Midlands Technical College prison program.

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